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Internationalization of Higher Education in Ukraine Amidst Mass Migration (2022–2026)

Internacjonalizacja szkolnictwa wyższego na Ukrainie w obliczu masowej migracji (2022–2026)

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ABSTRACT

In the article, a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of internationalization strategies in Ukrainian higher education amidst mass forced migration during 2022–2026 is provided. The transition from traditional market-oriented models to the concept of forced internationalization, where humanitarian and security determinants emerge as priorities, is examined. Based on a systems approach, the role of digitalization as the ontological foundation for the functioning of a university without borders, ensuring institutional stability and the preservation of national educational agency amidst the transborder dispersal of human capital, is substantiated within the study. Special attention is devoted to the phenomenon of educational diplomacy and the implementation of a smart protectionism policy aimed at defending intellectual sovereignty and preventing the irreversible loss of scientific potential. In the work, the experience of implementing the innovative DigiUni project and the DigiPlatform as tools for creating a unified digital space for inclusive practices and the remote accreditation of educational programs is analyzed. Furthermore, the risks of dual enrollment, deskilling, and the psychological traumatization of students and scholars affected by intersectional disadvantage are highlighted. The concept of transnational educational identity is conceptualized, with the Ukrainian case being defined as a unique precedent for combining digital resilience (agility) with soft power instruments. It is argued that the strategic combination of integration into the European Higher Education Area with mechanisms for equitable intellectual exchange allows for the transformation of forced migration into a resource for post-war recovery and the modernization of the national educational system.

Keywords: internationalization; higher education; digitalization; transformation; Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

The modern structure of global higher education is undergoing a fundamental changes, driven by the transition from neoliberal models of market competition toward concepts of socially responsible and humanitarian-oriented interaction. The global context of the past years indicates that internationalization has ceased to be exclusively a tool for economic enrichment or the improvement of institutional rankings, transforming instead into a critical mechanism for knowledge preservation under conditions of constant instability. Within pedagogical science, a large-scale transformation of the educational space is being observed, where traditional physical mobility is supplemented or replaced by complex forms of virtual and forced interaction. This necessitates a profound analysis of the cognitive aspects of learning, as educational subjects amidst mass migratory movements encounter unprecedented strain on the adaptive mechanisms of the psyche and professional identity. The relevance of this study is further underscored by the fact that the migration crises of 2022–2026 revealed a deficit in the resilience of classical university structures, compelling the scientific community to seek new theoretical frameworks for understanding the university without borders and the role of the academic community as a subject of diplomacy.

Despite the existence of numerous works dedicated to the integration of refugees into the educational systems of recipient countries, a pronounced gap remains in contemporary scientific discourse regarding the study of institutional agency and the survival strategies of university systems in countries experiencing active conflict or war. Existing research primarily focuses on the post-migration phase, treating displaced persons as objects of humanitarian aid, which leads to a degree of victimization and an underestimation of the agency of scholars and students. A contradiction is observed between the theory of traditional internationalization, which is based on voluntariness and parity, and the practice of forced internationalization, wherein the synchronization of educational standards and the recognition of qualifications occur under conditions of existential threat and the destruction of physical infrastructure. This study aims to resolve the outlined contradiction through the conceptualization of the Ukrainian experience of 2022–2026 as a unique precedent for combining digital resilience with the instruments of educational diplomacy. The purpose of this article is to analyze the transformation of internationalization strategies in Ukrainian higher education amidst mass migration during 2022–2026, which allows for the identification of effective models for preserving academic identity and establishing the groundwork for post-war recovery.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTERNATIONALIZATION RESEARCH

Contemporary scientific discourse regarding the internationalization of higher education in conditions of global instability is characterized by a significant expansion of the theoretical framework. Fundamental studies by de Wit and Altbach (2021) and demonstrate a transformation of approaches from market-oriented models toward the concept of socially responsible internationalization. The pandemic and geopolitical conflicts have revealed a deficit in the resilience of traditional formats of academic mobility, which has necessitated the development of the “Internationalization at Home” strategy as an effective tool for inclusion and institutional adaptability (Arar et al., 2021).

For a thorough understanding of the relevant processes, it is appropriate to define three key concepts. The first term, “forced internationalization,” denotes integration into the global academic space under the influence of force majeure factors, which necessitates the urgent synchronization of standards, diplomas, and programs beyond the scope of prior strategic preparation (Ergin et al., 2019). The second concept, “educational diplomacy,” is interpreted as the strategic activity of universities and the state aimed at forming international support coalitions, protecting intellectual sovereignty, and utilizing education as a soft power instrument within geopolitical confrontations (Mietule et al., 2024). The third concept, “transnational educational identity,” characterizes the state of a learner who, while residing in a foreign socio-cultural environment, maintains an affiliation with the Ukrainian academic continuum through digital and legal ties, thereby forming a hybrid model of loyalty and professional agency (Zayachuk, 2025).

This transformation of identity is confirmed by empirical mobility indicators. Analysis of statistical data indicates that 64% of displaced Ukrainian students have chosen the path of external migration, which exerts significant pressure on the system of qualification recognition and the stability of the domestic educational market (Bil et al., 2022). Under such circumstances, internationalization emerges as a threat of assimilation, while simultaneously opening prospects for the implementation of a dynamic human capital exchange model. This becomes possible provided that universities transform into global centers of knowledge generation that facilitate the continuous transfer of competencies and the integration of Ukrainian scholars into the global research space without the loss of national identity (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023).

The misalignment of classical mobility models with the challenges of martial law dictates a transition from situational management to strategic forecasting within the European Higher Education Area (Zayachuk, 2025). In this context, Ukraine must transform from a passive object of international support into a proactive subject and a full-fledged recipient of systemic assistance. Consequently, the

consideration of this issue delineates a field for analyzing transformations that will define the future of the state over the long term. The works of Streitwieser et al. (2023) hold particular significance in the study of forced migration. The concept of forced internationalization, developed by Ergin et al. (2019), is based on the experience of receiving Syrian students in Turkey, yet finds realization in the Ukrainian case during the war. In studies conducted between 2021 and 2023, Streitwieser (2023) emphasizes the importance of creating specific structures to support students at risk, as higher education serves as a form of humanitarian aid and a tool for long-term integration and societal recovery. The scholar's works lay the foundation for understanding the humanitarian rationale of internationalization, which supplements classical political and economic motives.

The current stage of scientific development in Ukraine is characterized by the predominance of an empirical approach to studying the socio-political and economic transformations caused by martial law. Bil et al. (2022) in a fundamental report for the Institute of Regional Research of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, provide a detailed description of the migration intentions of youth and identify security factors as key determinants of mobility. These conclusions align with the results of studies by Kurbet et al. (2025), which analyze threats to the reproduction of human potential under conditions of integration into the European Research Area. They emphasize that without the implementation of systemic support mechanisms, the dynamic mobility of scientific personnel acquires the characteristics of one-way, irreversible migration. A significant contribution has been made by Mietule et al. (2024), who developed a cluster model of educational diplomacy and identified universities as key subjects in shaping Ukraine's international image.

The literature review also highlights the issue of psychological well-being and identity. Prolonged displacement alters students' cognitive maps of the future, leading to an adaptive restructuring of personal strategies as a response to traumatic experience. Horokhova et al. (2025) in the journal *Social Sciences* present results of a study on the adaptation of Ukrainian students in Europe, pointing to high levels of anxiety and difficulties with the recognition of professional agency. Research by Zayachuk (2024) at the Centre for Global Higher Education offers a view of academic mobility as a tool for knowledge sovereignty, allowing universities to maintain institutional continuity even in situations of temporary occupation or displacement.

A comparative analysis of these concepts reveals a certain dichotomy between the Western vision of internationalization as a process of enrichment and the Ukrainian approach as a survival strategy. However, both approaches converge on the assertion that digitalization is an indispensable foundation for the future of higher education. The works of Zakharchenko et al. (2025) demonstrate the potential of Big Data in identifying hidden displacement patterns, allowing for the

formation of evidence-based educational policy. The resilience of the Ukrainian system is based on the combination of innovative technologies and the profound value-based connection of the academic community.

The mass forced migration of millions of Ukrainians, among whom students and academics constitute a significant proportion, has transformed the classical paradigm of international cooperation into the phenomenon of forced internationalization. The transformation of the internationalization paradigm in Ukraine throughout 2022–2026 is defined by a transition from voluntary mobility toward strategic flexibility under conditions of existential threat. The determinants of this process are multilayered in nature: ranging from the physical destruction of campuses to the legal necessity of integrating displaced persons into foreign educational systems. This phenomenon has evolved from a voluntary instrument of academic enrichment into a survival strategy and a means of preserving the agency of the national higher education system amidst the transborder dispersal of human capital (Denisova-Schmidt, Marmilova, 2026). Digital transformation emerged as the central vector of this adaptation, acquiring the status of the university's ontological foundation during the military conflict. It allowed for the nullification of the institution's traditional territorial binding, forming a university without borders model. In the context of mass migration, where over 78,000 school graduates were directly affected by the war during the first year of the invasion, the objective arises to deconstruct these challenges and identify adaptation vectors to preserve Ukraine's human capital (New York University, 2025).

The process of digital transformation became the response to the closure of physical classrooms and the foundation for constructing a new type of national educational ecosystem. The DigiUni project ("Digital University: Open Ukrainian Initiative"), implemented in 2024–2026 with the support of the Erasmus+ program, became a key vector of this adaptation. Its technical implementation, DigiPlatform was developed as an integration framework that does not replace existing university systems (notably those based on Moodle) but synchronizes them, creating a unified space for innovation and inclusive practices (Mansilla Sepúlveda, Vysotskyi, 2025). The experience of teaching in extreme conditions and asynchronous learning has been transformed into systemic methodological recommendations implemented through a network of DigiCenters at partner HEIs, providing material and technical modernization even in frontline regions.

This digital turn allowed Ukrainian higher education to demonstrate high adaptability (agility) amidst constant military threats and energy challenges. The implementation of adaptive learning and the utilization of cloud resources ensured the preservation of academic standards during times when the conventional learning format became impossible due to daily attacks during the war (Nechitailo, Kolisnyk, 2024). It is crucial to note that digital infrastructure serves as a foundation of sovereignty, enabling the remote accreditation of educational programs by the

National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance in accordance with ESG 2015 standards, which maintains the legitimacy of Ukrainian diplomas in the global space. Cooperation with foreign partners within virtual mobility, particularly through the Alliance for Internationalization and Collaboration, allows Ukrainian students to develop intercultural competencies through joint courses (e.g. “Professional English” with US universities) (Luczaj, Mucha, 2017). Initiatives such as Collaborative Online International Learning, integrated into the curricula of the Hague University of Applied Sciences and Ukrainian HEIs, scale the experience of international interaction without physical relocation, which is vital for students. Thus, digitalization under wartime conditions has transformed from an auxiliary tool into the ontological basis of internationalization, ensuring the continuity of knowledge transfer and the preservation of institutional agency on a transnational scale.

MIGRATORY DETERMINANTS AND RISKS

The large-scale migration of 2022–2026 has become a catalyst for the intensification of academic mobility. Statistical data confirm profound demographic and social shifts: over 5.9 million Ukrainian citizens are registered as refugees in European countries, a significant portion of whom are of student age or are research professionals. A study by Zakharchenko et al. (2025) presents a systematic analysis of educational losses: the war directly impacted 78,000 secondary education graduates (34% of the total number) in 2022. Forced displacement affected over 36,500 senior students, of whom 30.7% departed for Poland, 26.9% for Germany, and 8.3% for the Czech Republic. A critical indicator is the 21% decrease in participants for the National Multi-Subject Test compared to 2021, reflecting the decision of 41,500 young individuals to forgo pursuing higher education through traditional procedures. Analysis has revealed a phenomenon of “intersectional disadvantage”, wherein territorial, gender, and socio-economic factors amplify the destructive impact of war. The most vulnerable group was identified as young males from rural areas, who demonstrated minimal exam participation rates (Horokhova et al., 2025). This indicates significant differentiation in access to educational services between urbanized centers and rural regions under occupation or active hostilities. For subjects of the educational process who continue their studies, the problem of “dual enrollment,” simultaneous preparation in a foreign university program for legalization purposes and a Ukrainian university program to preserve identity, becomes acute (Kurbet et al., 2025). Excessive cognitive and psychological strain causes a deficit in adaptive resources: empirical research findings from 2024–2025 record high indicators of depression, emotional instability, and anxiety among students as consequences of traumatic experience.

The risk of deskilling and the inefficient utilization of intellectual capital (“brain waste”) among displaced researchers poses a significant threat to personnel potential. Despite being granted temporary protection status in EU countries, a considerable number of researchers encounter bureaucratic obstacles in qualification recognition procedures or find it impossible to continue narrow-specialized scientific research due to the loss of laboratory facilities in Ukraine (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023). These factors compel high-level professionals to transition into sectors of the host countries’ economies unrelated to their professional training, causing an irreversible loss of Ukraine’s scientific potential. Concurrently, the implementation of Dual Education Programs in Ukraine, which involve combining theoretical study with practical activity at enterprises, is viewed as a tool for enhancing graduates’ competitiveness in the labor market during the post-war period and facilitating economic recovery. Mitigating these risks requires a conceptual reimagining of academic mobility: a transition from the model of irreversible migration to a strategy of equitable intellectual exchange. This implies transforming forced departure into a process of continuous professional transit and the accumulation of international experience for subsequent implementation within the domestic scientific space (Kurbet et al., 2025). International support, such as the “Solidarity with Ukraine” program in Poland or scholarship projects in Germany, must be directed toward integrating researchers into the European Research Area while simultaneously maintaining their affiliation with institutions in Ukraine. Such an approach will enable the formation of a transnational scientific diaspora that, in the long term, will provide technology transfer and the modernization of the national educational system in accordance with global standards, transforming demographic losses into a strategic resource for development.

EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY AND PROTECTIONISM

In the context of globalization, higher education is being transformed from a local institution into a strategic platform for the defense of national agency. For Ukraine, the preservation of identity within the European Higher Education Area is identified as a priority for intellectual stability. Integration into the European Higher Education Area, the updating of standards according to the European Qualifications Framework, and harmonization with the International Standard Classification of Education serve as instruments for ensuring the competitiveness and compatibility of the Ukrainian educational system (Nechitailo, Kolisnyk, 2024). Throughout 2024–2025, higher education reform in Ukraine has directly correlated with the negotiation process for EU accession, necessitating the implementation of individual educational trajectories and the expansion of university autonomy within the framework of the Bologna Process. The contemporary paradigm of education diplomacy involves viewing universities as key subjects of public

diplomacy and factors of the state's soft power (Mietule et al., 2024). According to the cluster model, educational diplomacy is based on three components: the formation of a positive institutional image, the development of interpersonal ties among participants in the educational process, and the intensification of scientific diplomacy through international project and publication activities. Universities function as centers of knowledge diplomacy, where representatives of various states, non-governmental organizations, and business structures interact to solve global problems, ensuring the promotion of Ukraine's national interests and values (Knight, 2022).

In this context, the theory of educational protectionism, adapted to 21st-century realities, gains relevance. Unlike the classical protectionism of Friedrich List, which aimed at protecting industry, modern educational protectionism seeks the temporary shielding of human capital and scientific schools from absorption by global actors during a crisis. This involves creating conditions to attract and retain talented youth within the Ukrainian legal field through the development of digital ecosystems and network universities (Arar et al., 2021). Such an approach allows Ukraine to maintain its agency within the European Higher Education Area, acting simultaneously as a recipient of standards and a donor of unique experience in crisis management and digital transformation. In the pedagogical dimension, this necessitates the implementation of institutional resilience strategies to preserve intellectual potential (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023). The realization of this is possible through the development of flexible virtual mobility tools and the promotion of a transparent credit transfer mechanism within the European Higher Education Area, which is favorable for Ukrainian universities. Such steps motivate youth to maintain a connection with the national educational system without violating the principles of academic freedom and autonomy until the sector stabilizes. The effective use of educational diplomacy tools allows Ukrainian universities to influence foreign target audiences (politicians, scientists, and students) by popularizing educational potential and securing international support for post-war recovery. In this model, academic mobility is transformed into a mechanism of knowledge sovereignty, where every migrant student fulfills the role of an ambassador for Ukrainian culture and science. Thus, the strategic combination of integration into European structures with a policy of rational educational protectionism becomes the foundation for preserving Ukraine's national identity amidst globalization and war.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research confirms that the mass migration of 2022–2026 acts as a determinant of a fundamental paradigmatic transformation of higher education in Ukraine. The analysis of these processes allows for the assertion

that the risk of a significant outflow of intellectual capital is real; however, it is minimized provided there is an appropriate state response. Traditional approaches to internationalization as a tool for commercialization have given way to the concept of forced internationalization, where humanitarian and security values are prioritized. The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that under wartime conditions, universities fulfill the function of preserving national sovereignty, acting as a distributed network through projects such as DigiUni, which lack a fixed geographical binding. The results of the analysis permit the identification of a fundamental paradigmatic shift in the higher education system: during war, the transition from classical market internationalization to a model of smart protectionism becomes an effective means of preserving the country's human capital. Digital transformation processes, specifically the DigiUni project and the implementation of remote accreditation, offer advantages for ensuring the viability of the system. Digitalization alone does not resolve the problem of psychological trauma among learners. Technological solutions require accompaniment by a complex of psycho-pedagogical strategies involving the implementation of psychological support protocols, tutoring, and the development of resilience within the virtual environment. These processes may generate risks of academic formalism. This underscores the need for developing new instruments for monitoring and assessing the quality of educational services through the application of learning analytics, internal quality assurance systems based on constant stakeholder feedback, and the involvement of international experts in joint digital audits of educational programs. The Ukrainian case holds universal significance for the global context, as it proves the ability of a university's digital and value-based network to act as a factor in supporting state sovereignty and national identity even under conditions of physical infrastructure destruction.

A comparison of the Ukrainian experience with international standards indicates that Ukraine is establishing a unique precedent by combining digital resilience and educational diplomacy. Zakharchenko's works highlight the problem of double disadvantage for rural youth at the intersection of age and territorial factors. This points to the need for targeted state policy to protect human capital in regions from prolonged regression. The prolongation of the legal status of displaced persons in EU countries (specifically illustrated by the Norwegian initiative to extend protection for up to five years) forms a new temporal horizon for the implementation of intellectual mobility mechanisms. This allows for the transformation of forced migration into a systemic exchange of knowledge and professional competencies and requires Ukraine to intensify engagement with the academic diaspora as a resource for future development.

The synthesis of the results allows for the formulation of recommendations for implementing a policy of educational protectionism, based on List's ideas and adapted to the knowledge economy. This consists of creating digital safety

zones where Ukrainian standards and identity are protected by synchronization technologies (DigiPlatform) and international agreements on the mutual recognition of qualifications. Educational diplomacy, through the cluster model, must become part of public policy, wherein each university acts as a tool of soft power, ensuring the legitimacy and presence of Ukraine in the global intellectual space.

The internationalization of higher education in Ukraine amidst mass migration serves as an instrument for the preservation and further development of the nation. It requires a transition from outdated bureaucratic approaches to dynamic network interaction, where knowledge is the priority capital and digital resilience is the guarantor of sovereignty. Ukraine proves that even in the face of physical infrastructure destruction, the academic community maintains unity and agency, shaping a new reality in a period of global instability. Perspectives for further research lie in the longitudinal analysis of the professional trajectories of graduates who studied under conditions of dual enrollment, and the development of quantitative indicators for the effectiveness of educational diplomacy in the context of post-war recovery.

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ABSTRAKT

W niniejszym artykule przeprowadzono pogłębioną analizę transformacji strategii internacjonalizacji szkolnictwa wyższego Ukrainy w obliczu masowej migracji przymusowej w latach 2022–2026. Podjęto próbę zbadania ewolucji od tradycyjnych modeli rynkowych ku koncepcji internacjonalizacji wymuszonej, w której rolę nadrzędną przypisano determinantom humanitarnym oraz paradygmatowi bezpieczeństwa. Z uwzględnieniem podejścia systemowego uzasadniono funkcję cyfryzacji jako ontologicznego fundamentu działalności uniwersytetu bez granic, warunkującego stabilność instytucjonalną oraz zachowanie podmiotowości edukacji narodowej w sytuacji transgranicznego rozproszenia kapitału ludzkiego. Szczególną uwagę skoncentrowano na fenomenie dyplomacji edukacyjnej oraz implementacji polityki inteligentnego protekcjonizmu, ukierunkowanej na ochronę suwerenności intelektualnej i przeciwdziałanie nieodwracalnej utracie potencjału naukowego. W opracowaniu poddano ewaluacji doświadczenia wynikające z realizacji innowacyjnego projektu DigiUni oraz platformy DigiPlatform, traktowanych jako instrumenty kreowania spójnej przestrzeni cyfrowej na rzecz praktyk inkluzywnych oraz zdalnej akredytacji programów kształcenia. Zidentyfikowano ryzyka związane ze zjawiskiem podwójnego kształcenia, dekwalfikacją zawodową oraz traumatyzacją psychologiczną studentów i kadry naukowej, podlegających wpływom niekorzystnych czynników intersekcyjnych. Skonceptualizowano pojęcie transnarodowej tożsamości edukacyjnej oraz zdefiniowano przypadek ukraiński jako unikalny precedens korelacji cyfrowej zwinności z instrumentami miękkiej siły. Wykazano, iż strategiczne powiązanie integracji z Europejskim Obszarem Szkolnictwa Wyższego z mechanizmami parytetowej wymiany intelektualnej umożliwia redefinicję migracji przymusowej jako zasobu służącego powojennej rekonstrukcji i modernizacji państwowego systemu edukacji.

Słowa kluczowe: internacjonalizacja; szkolnictwo wyższe; cyfryzacja; transformacja; Ukraina